Cutting Corners

The Story of Ransom Place's Camp Street

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Various Camp Street Historical House Markers

What is Ransom Place?

“

Ransom Place is a neighborhood defined by rich history and passionate residents with incredible amounts of civic pride.

City-County Councillor Vop Osili, 2017

“

My fear is for my neighborhood, once we die out, that there will not be any black people living in the neighborhood.

Paula Brooks, longtime resident, in a 2019 interview

Founded in 1897, Ransom Place is a historic Black neighborhood named in 1991 after Freeman Ransom, Madam C J Walker's lawyer and one of the neighborhood's more famous residents. Named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1992, today Ransom Place stands as one of the city's most intact African-American neighborhoods.

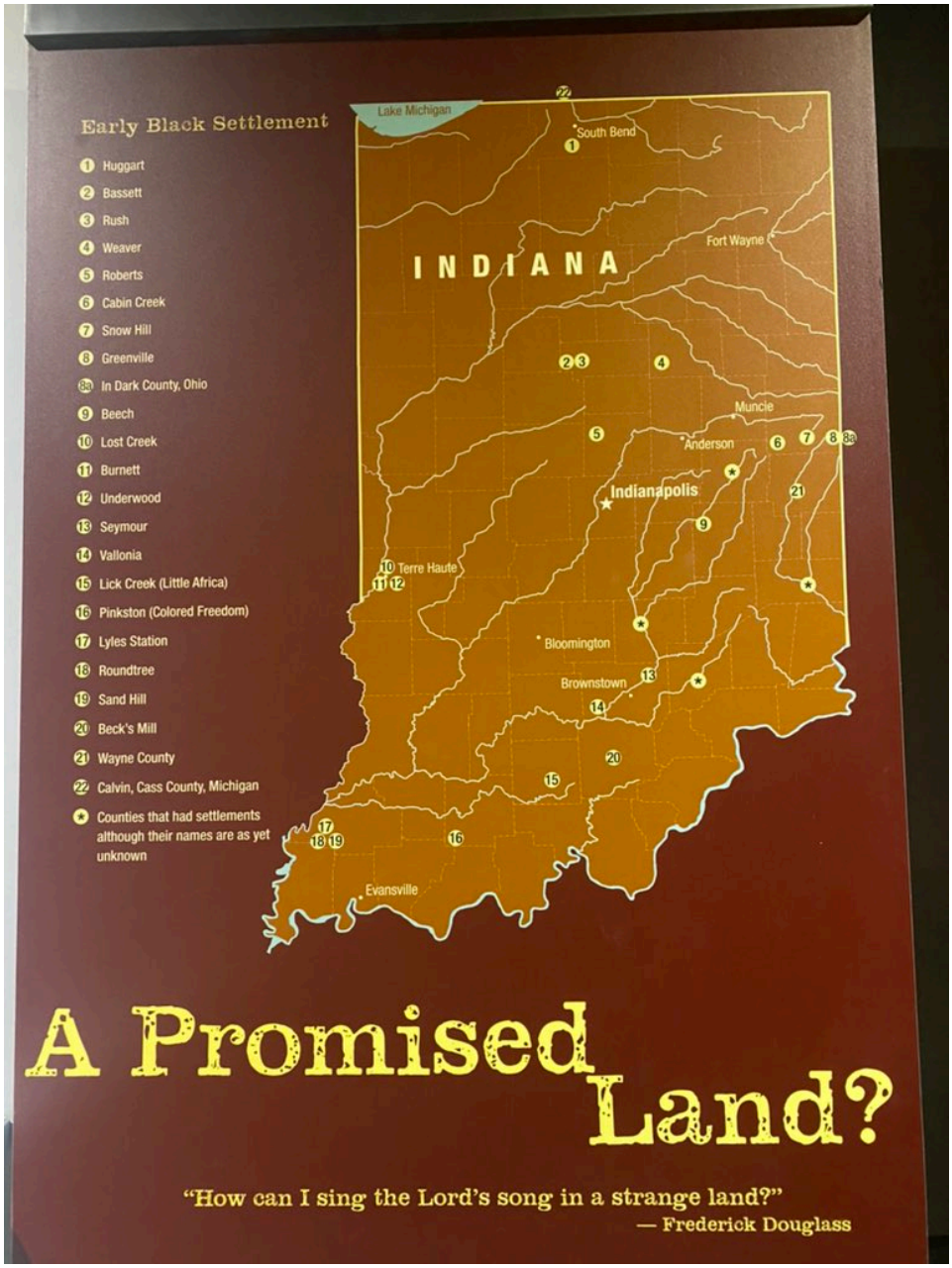
This is in spite of all the parts of the neighborhood that were bulldozed to make room for IUPUI, as well as ongoing gentrification concerns.

Ransom Place today, including the archaeology site

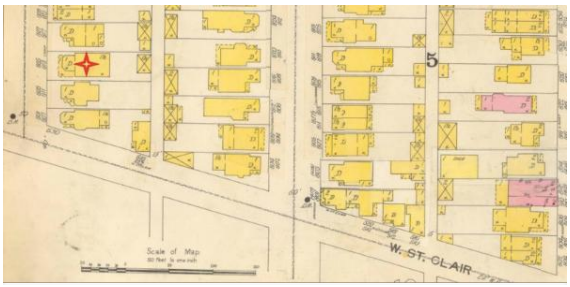
Who lived here? What were their lives like? How do we know? How do we tell that story?

Indiana in a Snapshot

Indiana has a history of black settlement and community building, going as far back as 1860 there are several early black settlements in Indiana, with a notably large population in Indianapolis and Marion County.



According to the 1840 census only 122 African Americans lived in Indianapolis, with that number shooting up to 498 by 1860, and an astonishing increase to 2.931 in 1870.



Additional map of Camp Street

“one of the largest Negro communities in the state” as well as noting “… there were also Negroes in the rural parts of Marion County.”

Black code laws of Indiana: the unwritten rules that accompanied Jim Crow era Indiana.

What better way to understand the structure and enforcement and history of institutionalized racism present in Indiana than from those who lived it? Recorded in 1973 by Father Boniface Hardin and Sister Jane Schilling as part of the Afro-American in Indiana radio series.

Media Collections Online

Timestamp: 01:55

"Normally a code is something that you follow, like an orderly disposition of law. A code is not always necessarily a legal thing- well we have fire codes and health codes and they are legal… but a black code does not always necessarily imply legal restrictions or impositions on people. Some of the codes are legal, yes, but others are not, they are traditional."

Things changed across the nation with the passage of the Housing Act of 1949, the goal was the eradication of slums while providing federal subsidies to the redevelopers. This of course led to the targeting of minority communities that developers and city officials had labeled as slums, including Ransom Place and its neighborhoods to make way for the expansion of IUPUI.

MARION GRANTED $500,000 ON FEDERAL HOUSING PLAN

Washington, May 25—(AP)—The United States housing authority set aside $23,230,000 today for 16 proposed slum clearance and low-rent housing projects.

The reservation of funds increased to $357,778,000 the amount earmarked out of the $500,000,000 slum clearance program funds.

Of the $23,230,000 reserved today, $21,230,000 was set aside for local housing authorities which previously had not participated. These included:

Marion, Indiana, $500,000.

Newspaper Federal Housing Plan clipping

After work began to expand IUPUI neighborhoods began to decline in population and in businesses, the decline became readily apparent in the census of 1970 when 74 of the residences in Camp Street were vacant.

The stories of the people as the area was reduced are tragic and detail a real-time loss of community and place that will be covered next, so I'll leave you all with this statement from a Camp Street resident

"That's the thing that was the hurting thing... to see a vibrant neighborhood beginning to decay because of removal of neighbors and replacement of some other people who did not take [care] of the housing. But then IUPUI was growing and... so they started. Our house was one of the last houses to be taken, because we were trying to keep it. But after the death of our father, we really didn't have any need for it. It was a beautiful house, we wanted to hang on to it, but we knew that it had to go, because of development. It was for progress. --- ×" Johnson, 131

What is Camp Street?

Camp Street was just one part of a community that was established early in Indiana history that was home to a diverse population and thriving businesses.

Into the first decade of the twentieth century the demographics of Camp Street had moved from mostly white 1st generation Hoosiers and immigrants to become home to a predominately African American population.

The displacement of the residents under the guise of slum clearance and reduction of their community inform us of a history of hostile expansion, gentrification, and racial politics present in Indiana and the structure of IUPUI.

Ransom Place Historical Marker

1887 Sanborn map (left), 2021 satellite image (right)

History of Camp Street

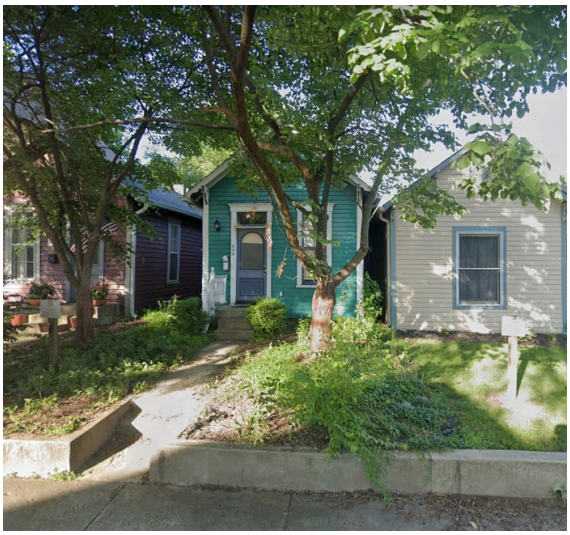
The first house in Ransom Place was built on Camp Street right after the Civil War, but most of the neighborhood was built after the 1880s. By 1884 there was a building at the corner of Camp and St. Clair streets: a bakery and home belonging to John Lotz.

943 Camp Street, built before 1880, is still standing today. It was the home of Eddye May Whitaker, who hosted civic club meetings for Black women in the city as well as book meetings, parties, and charity events.

Later, the Cowherd family moved into 943 Camp Street from 947 Camp Street. They would live there until 1970, and their cousin

William Cowherd lived across the street at 944 Camp Street. He ran a barbershop and store on Indiana Avenue in the 1940s and his wife was a school teacher at the nearby Flanner House.

Much of the home's original architecture is still intact today. In 2022, it was listed for rent at $1400/month.



943 Camp Street in 2019

813 is another notable residence, built sometime between 1887 and 1898. It was home to a barber shop owner, a Baldwin Piano Company teamster, postal worker, and Zenobia Fisher, who was born in the house and lived there until 1969. Zenobia was a member of the Colored Women's Republican Club and served as chairman of its education commission in 1928. She fought to have a traffic light installed at the intersection of St. Clair and West street to create a safer crossing for St. Bridget's Catholic School, and helped found the Indianapolis chapter of the Assisting Leukemia Stricken American Children group.

813 Camp Street still stands today, and was last listed for rent at $1995 in 2022.

A grocery store on the corner of Camp street operated for over 80 years beginning in 1892. Mary and William Smith were the first owners/operators, followed by several others like Martha Miller in 1911. The store represented a sort of stepping stone in entrepreneurship in the neighborhood, with owners and employees living in the adjacent house, and was open until 1969.

Progress, but for Whom?

Camp Street, like the rest of Ransom Place, had a lively community filled with people, families, children, and their pets. It was known for its corner stores. One in particular was run by Martha J. Miller.

> *"Miller eventually would live in Indianapolis for 35 years, where she managed a corner store for almost two decades. The store she managed stood on the corner of Camp and St. Clair Streets in a neighborhood now known as Ransom Place, among the only surviving residential neighborhoods from the historically African-American near-Westside... Miller was one of scores of people who migrated to Indianapolis, and her story as an aspiring merchant and a Midwestern transplant was similar to that of many of her neighbors in the Circle City."*
>
> *Community and Corner Stores in Indianapolis, Paul Mullins, 2016*

In search of better opportunities, she traveled to Indiana to stay with a friend, William Curry, to run what would become the most prominent corner store on Camp Street.

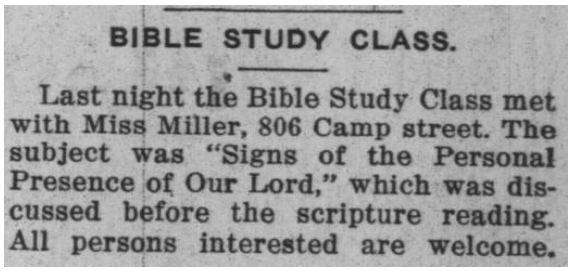
WILLIAM CURRY.

Ten years prior to her immigration to the US, Martha had been living in Canada along with her birth parents. There is little known history on her family except that they were born prior to Emancipation. It is debated whether they were descended from African Americans that left the US during slavery.

“ Miller had immigrated to the US in 1910 from Canada, and when the census-keeper visited her

home in 1920 she was recorded as a Black 44 year-old who was running a grocery, which likely was in the corner lot. Neighbors today remember the lot being used as a corner store until around 1960."

June 9th, 1903 News Clipping



BIBLE STUDY CLASS.

Last night the Bible Study Class met with Miss Miller, 806 Camp street. The subject was "Signs of the Personal Presence of Our Lord," which was discussed before the scripture reading. All persons interested are welcome.

Mention of Martha Miller in local newspaper: March 5th, 1915

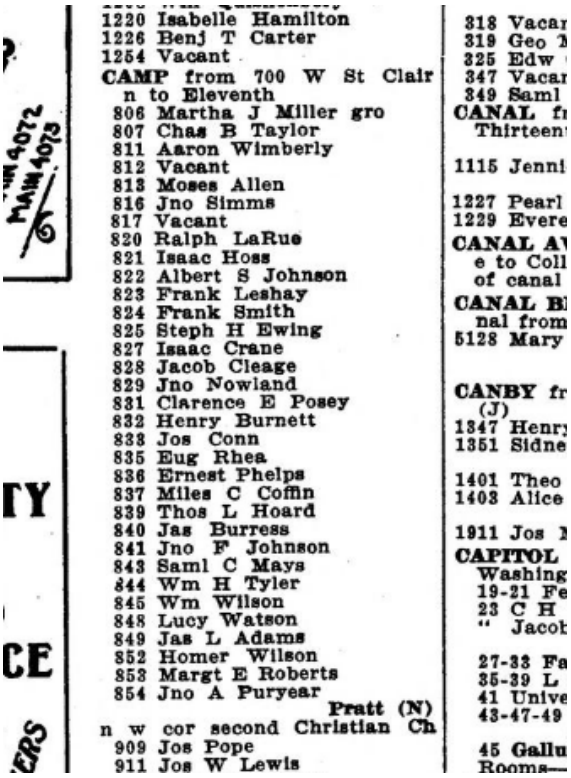
Above all, it was a community:

During the excavations of Camp Street, a multitude of artifacts depicting aspects of the residents' daily lives were found. These people had children, family pets, and enjoyed drinking soda in the comfort of their homes, like any other community. Their histories were not forgotten.

Assortment of artifacts depicting evidence of community presence

Things took an unexpected turn for the community when IUPUI set their sights on Ransom Place for their invasive construction. Community members were being approached left and right, asking for the rights to their properties in exchange for unequal

compensation. Ransom Place's structure was altered greatly by IUPUI's growing expansion at the cost of its community's displacement.



1220 Isabelle Hamilton
1226 Benj T Carter
1254 Vacant
CAMP from 700 W St Clair
n to Eleventh
806 Martha J Miller gro
807 Chas B Taylor
811 Aaron Wimberly
812 Vacant
813 Moses Allen
816 Jno Simms
817 Vacant
820 Ralph LaRue
821 Isaac Hoss
822 Albert S Johnson
823 Frank Leshay
824 Frank Smith
825 Steph H Ewing
827 Isaac Crane
828 Jacob Cleage
829 Jno Nowland
831 Clarence E Posey
832 Henry Burnett
833 Jos Conn
835 Eug Rhea
836 Ernest Phelps
837 Miles C Coffin
839 Thos L Hoard
840 Jas Burress
841 Jno F Johnson
843 Saml C Mays
844 Wm H Tyler
845 Wm Wilson
848 Lucy Watson
849 Jas L Adams
852 Homer Wilson
853 Margt E Roberts
854 Jno A Puryear
Pratt (N)
n w cor second Christian Ch
909 Jos Pope
911 Jos W Lewis

318 Vacar
319 Geo
325 Edw
347 Vacar
349 Saml
CANAL fr
Thirteen
1115 Jenni
1227 Pearl
1229 Evere
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e to Coll
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5128 Mary
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1347 Henr
1351 Sidne
1401 Theo
1403 Alice
1911 Jos
CAPITOL
Washing
19-21 Fe
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" Jacob
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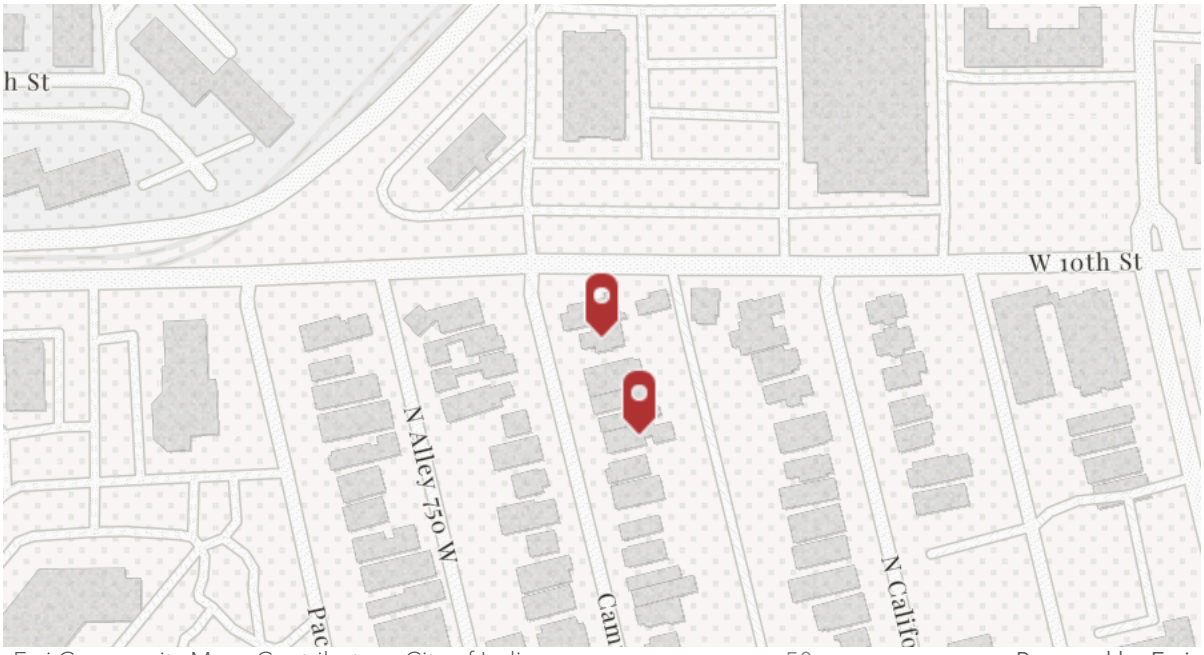
41 Unive
43-47-49
45 Gallu
Rooms—

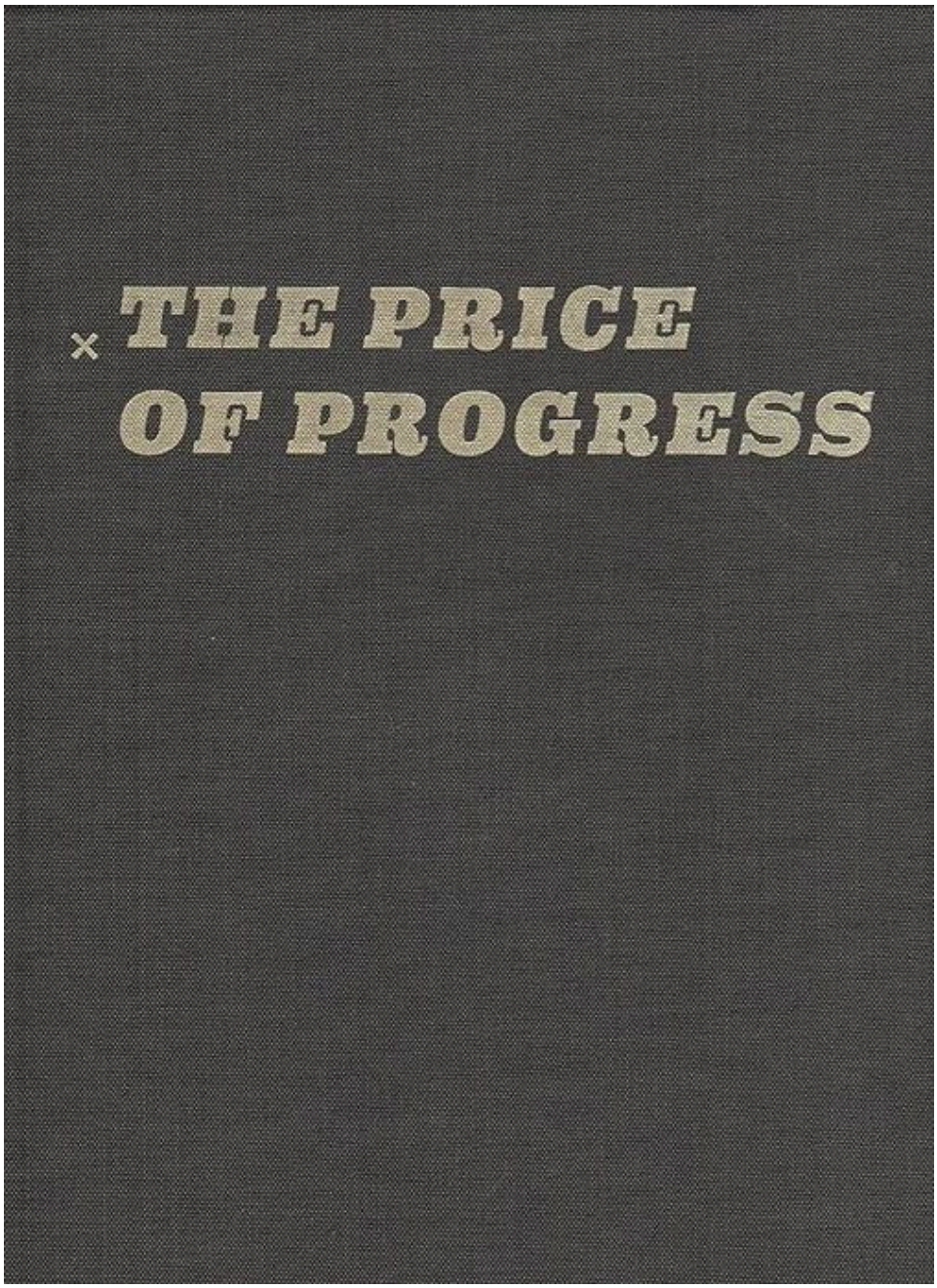
Camp Street 1917 City Directory

A before and after photo comparing the past structural makeup of IUPUI to the present.



Map points for houses on Camp Street via city directory data

Above all, there is nothing more vital to preserving history than the lived experiences of those who resided there. Oral histories are sometimes all we've got to elevate their voices.



The Price of Progress, by Paul Mullins and Glenn S. White

Here are some excerpts from a chapter in the book *The Price of Progress:*

It was for Progress": IUPUI and African-American Displacement:

"Discussions about a university campus in Indianapolis' near-Westside began in the 1950s, just as federal urban renewal funds were being used to expand the Indiana University Medical Center. In the 1960s Indiana University began to acquire individual properties throughout the near-Westside, a more gradual process than the rapid and widespread

displacements associated with massive urban renewal projects, but by 1969 a vast swath of space had been acquired by the newly established Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis. That piecemeal purchase pattern continued into the 1980s" (Mullins, 130).

"The university moved into that area in the 50s. They were just buying property… people were being dislocated. Then there was no big movement on the part of any Black organizations to defend the Blacks . I think that some of them were aware, because, like… some of the real estate guys were making money in the process. They were acquiring property for the university. --- ×" Cummings, 130

"There was some discussion in the community about how the University is taking this property and throwing all these fine, poor people out that have been there for years and years and years. New York on the south and Michigan on the north and Blake over here on this side and Agnes, or what's now University on this side. There were 93 families in that lot… And I think it was a total of 27 of them in which we found nobody related to the people that owned the property that was living in the house. --- ×" Taylor, 133

Camp Street Store Photo 9471

"Charles Hardy was the director of campus development, but our boss really was Dr. Bloom at IU. But, all I did was interview families and try to find housing for them… those who were being relocated. The University went in to buy them out. They had it appraised, and would give the family fair market value. --- ×" Edelen, 134-135

Camp Street Store Photo 9475

"I know there was a lot of resistance to IU buying the property. Well one thing they, they felt like they were not getting enough for the houses. They could not buy with what they got. --- ×" Edelen, 135-136

Camp Street Store Photo 9478

Archaeological Work

All the archaeological work began on May 11, 2000 at the then-empty lot at 800 Camp Street. Stories from people who knew the buildings that used to stand on that lot as a corner store, and the team would eventually excavate the store foundations.

The work began with a tour of the neighborhood from Thomas Ridley, a lifelong resident, and visiting two different museums

talking about African-American life in the area.

When they did break ground on the excavations, they very quickly started to find a tile floor. They were certainly in the right place!

Tile floor found early in excavations

Within two weeks, the team found several thousand artifacts and a well. The well would have been used before city water became available, and when people stopped using it for water around 1930, people would dump trash in it. This is useful as it tends to be less disturbed and the artifacts in better condition.

The well during the archaeological work vs now

This sort of household trash showing in wells and similar features was very common. Some things, like this Barbasol closure, aren't entirely unlike modern-day trash. Barbasol shaving cream is still sold today!

Barbasol closure recovered from the site

The digging ended on June 21, 2000 with around 10,000 recovered objects. Finds ranged from food remains, soda bottles, a surprising number of marbles, decorative items,

and a lot more. Surprisingly, the finds looked more like what we would expect from a house than a store.

This is just one of many, many marbles recovered from the lot

The high number of marbles speaks to the social role of the lot: this was a place where people in the neighborhood could hang out, and kids have been playing with (and losing) marbles in this area for a long time.

While many of the artifacts answer questions about the past of this area and the people who lived there, some raise questions of their own. There are some artifacts that are still unidentified.

Concluding Thoughts

Camp Street was once home to a bustling community, filled with lively residents, prominent corner stores, and years of untold history.

May 26th, 2000

Had it not been for the consistent community outreach and excavation of Camp Street conducted by archaeologist Paul Mullins and his students, these stories might have remained buried beneath us. While vast parts of Ransom Place may have been built over, enough remained above as a reminder of the community that was once displaced.

Ransom Place Field School

Paul Mullins

Paul Mullins took the thoughts and experiences of those who lived there from the margins and brought them to the center. The work was not limited to the excavations, but expanded into the oral histories and stories these people wanted to tell.

So, now we know the history of Ransom Place. We know about the people who lived on Camp Street. We know that Camp Street once held a lively, irreplaceable community prior to its displacement.

But what comes next?

In order to approach this question, we have to ask ourselves:

What was all of this for, and what should we do next?

The excavations have been done, so does the work stop there? How can we preserve and uplift these histories, knowing how they have been pushed aside in the past?

A protester against IUPUI expansion

Talk about it.

We need to talk about the people who lived here. Talk about what it means to be in a displaced community at the mercy of the construction of a wealthy university. Holding accountability and acknowledging the mistakes of the past creates optimism for the future.

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